Ken Okoth: The Pauper’s Son Who Would Become King

By Oby Obyerodhyambo

"Ken Okoth did more for Kibra than any other M.P. We are losing young people who care, while old people who robbed this country, and continue to do so are living long lives."

This was an impassioned tweet from Rasna Warah, a seasoned writer and social commentator upon the demise of Ken Okoth, M.P for Kibra who had been battling colorectal cancer. Rasna spoke my thoughts and that of many people who saw his death coming but continued to live in denial.

Her lament, reminded me of a sigiiya – dirge I had heard in Luo land many years ago. It went thus: “Jo”mabeyo tho rumo, jo richo ema odong...jo richo ema dong” (While the good and noble people die and heading to extinction, the evil ones remain and live long).

The lamenters since Ken Okoth passed away, have mourned the untimeliness of his passing. This is not only because he died prematurely, it is clear that there was a sense that the youthful MP’s work was not yet done. Ken was doing and saying all the right things and demonstrating what real leadership is and can do. Prior to his elevation to the seat of MP for Kibra, Ken Okoth was not a household name. All he was publicly known for, was his service as a legislator and representative par excellence to the people of Kibra and Kenya. It is my feeling that the gravity of the loss to the Kenyan nation, is yet to be comprehended.
Ken Okoth was several great people rolled into one: he was an eloquent pacifist in a midst of a volatile place like Kibra much like Martin Luther King. He was a compassionate and dedicated humanist with a caring heart for the poor much like J.M. Kariuki. He was a revolutionary feminist in the midst of a patriarchal and at time misogynistic polity that has refused to implement the 1/3 gender rule in parliament, like Thomas Sankara. He was an intelligent, inspirational visionary servant leader like Tom Mboya. The irony, and indeed the thrust of Rasna’s cry of anguish, and which resonates with the Luo dirge, is that all these luminaries died young. Sankara at 38, Martin Luther King and T.J.Mboya at 39, J.M.Kariuki at 46 and Ken Okoth at 41 years.

Odhiambo Okoth: From the pits of Kibra to the streets of excellence.

Ken’s rise from abject poverty has been told and re-told many times. He himself lost no opportunity to speak about it. He was a child of Kibra, born and bred in the slum, he endured a childhood of extreme want, hunger, vulnerability and humiliation. Admission to secondary school, afforded him his first-ever bed and the experience of a three square meal life. He underwent the trauma of seeing the family house built precariously beside the Kenya Uganda railway line in Kibra flattened by bulldozers and his family rendered homeless and destitute, as a child. He attended Olympic Primary school in bum-bare tattered clothes, and it is only his brilliance in school where he scored 613 out of a possible 700 that secured him a place at Starehe Boys Centre and technically out of the ghetto. Even then, Save the Children Fund had to intervene with a full four-year scholarship to enable Ken join high school. He went on to excel and qualify for a Law degree at the University of Nairobi, but poverty came knocking again. He missed that opportunity, because he could not raise the requisite monies to top up what Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) offered students in education loans.

The system had failed Ken Odhiambo Okoth once again. Undeterred, Okoth went to the Nation newspapers where he had once volunteered and got a gig selling newspapers to survive. He also did a two-year stint as a security guard, or plainly put, a watchman at the Goethe Institute where he had been gifted German lessons. Through providence, Ken managed to meet a benefactor as he delivered the East African Newspaper who supported his application to study in the US. Ken continued to excel academically; completed his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees and with these accomplishments, his uniqueness emerged. While in the US, Ken formed an NGO called ‘Children of Kibera Foundation’ (Watoto wa Kibera) in 2006 and began mobilizing resources to support the education of the children he had left back home in Kibra. Through his fundraising and networking efforts, he supported the education of the underprivileged, orphaned children in Kibra. By 2008 his charity had funded the setting up of a computer lab at a local slum school. Since 2006, 10 top needy students from Kibra have benefitted from annual bursary scholarships. Before he was elected M.P, he was already impacting the lives of the children in Kibra.

Ken owns the story of his poverty-stricken background, not as a way to earn sympathy, or to justify entitlement. He does not use his deprived background to justify aggrandisement and the amassing of wealth. Ken has avoided the fetishization or romanticization of poverty throughout his public service. He describes poverty and want as ugly things. What Ken learnt from his experience was not to flee from poverty and the poor, but that instead made it his mission as the one who got out to pull up those stuck in that abyss. He once said, “Being poor is just a circumstance where you start in life. It is not your destiny and it can change.” Ken has been a change agent. He offers himself as an example, a challenge and an inspiration to the poor youth. He is evidence that one can transcend poverty and embark onto the road towards leadership while reaching out to rescue others. In the run-up to the 2017 elections he said,

‘We want to encourage more young people, stand up and be counted. You don’t have to be rich to participate. You know I was a young boy born and raised in Kibra, I serve in the National Assembly as a recognised leader in this country with a title. I want that, to be an
encouragement to other young people. Stand and be counted. Fight for your country, serve for your country.’

Ken, never did glorify poverty, he questioned its entrenchment and the fact that the governance system did not seem to be able to do anything about it. During one function in Kibra graced by the First Lady, Margaret Kenyatta, he condemned the poverty porn that drives tourists to Kibra.

“Kibra is not a zoo” he said.

Ken disliked the way that the governing elite gave the poor short shrift and in an act of defiance, broke ranks with his ODM (Orange Democratic Movement) party to vote against the 16% VAT bill that he deemed anti-poor.

“My conscience could not allow me to subject the poor to more hardships via my vote. Granted that the price of unga, milk and other select stuff are spared the weight of the bill, other basics like textiles that hide our nudity, shoes, fuel and even mobile phones that are increasingly becoming a necessity will move further from the reach of the majority poor. I feel it as I remember my days at Olympic Primary School in worn out sandak shoes and patched uniform.”

Ken Okoth empathised with the downtrodden, for it was a life that he had experienced. Echoing J.M.Kariuki’s famous “we do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars” he decried the dichotomization of the Kenyan society into economic class based ghettos. He said, ‘We must make sure that Kenya is not a country of two tribes: the rich who live in exclusion and really, really have it, and the poor who are suffering in indignity. That is a recipe for chaos.”

Champion for Education; Girls emancipation.

Ken Okoth believed that education had enabled him to alter the course of his life. He was passionate about ensuring access to education for the poor in general, but more so in his Kibra backyard. He once challenged the logic of imposing VAT on books, and questioned how any nation with the future of its youth in mind, would deny them, especially youth living in poverty, access to books via taxation? He recognised that education had transformed his life by opening opportunities for him, and this is what he desired to provide his constituents. As soon as he was elected to the National Assembly in 2013, he drew a strategic plan with education emerging as the priority issue, hence the ‘Elimu Kwanza’ – Education First mantra. His strategy revolved around increasing access to secondary education for those average children who scored low marks in primary school because he knew these children were underperforming because of challenges brought about by poverty.

His plans included building three secondary school: Shadrack Kimalel, Mbagathi and Kibera High school. He philosophically stated the empowering impact of education,

“If you give a person a house, you have given them just that house and the dignity that comes from just that house. If you give someone an education, you have given them a skill-set and tools, the freedom and dignity of coming to choose where else they could live. What other career they could pursue.”

He finalised construction of a magnificent school through Constituency Development Funds (CDF) with a record low budget. This is the loudest testimony of his integrity, and conversely, the depths of misappropriation and mismanagement by other CDF holders. He was particularly passionate about the education of the girls. He declared in an interview, ‘I am a feminist. I support women, and I think that girls and our mothers and our sisters need equal opportunities to get into political leadership.’ Ken Okoth’s vision was consistent with that of a fellow revolutionary and avowed feminist, Thomas
Sankara of Burkina Faso who said,

“In the ministries responsible for education, we should take special care to assure that women’s access to education is a reality, for this reality constitutes a qualitative step towards emancipation. It is an obvious fact that wherever women have had access to education, their march to equality has been accelerated.”

He argued for increased access for women in positions of leadership and governance and was very concerned about opening up the political space so that women could play a bigger and more equitable role.

**Courageous, non-conformist and independent-minded to a fault.**

Ken Okoth was not one to shy away from controversial issues that other politicians avoided. Indeed, there have been loud murmurs that the big wigs of his sponsoring party were not always happy with his non-partisan approach to politics. Ken Okoth believed in ideology, but not sycophancy. From the onset, he stated that he was influenced politically by Raila Odinga, whom he referred to as his idol, and that he subscribed to the tenets of Social Democracy. However, he was not comfortable with the personality cults entrenched in Kenyan politics and political parties. During his first campaign, he raised the issue of land rights for the Nubian community in Kibra, an explosive issue that even Nubian politicians avoided. He believed that the Nubian community had a human and constitutional right to titles over the land that they occupied in Kibra. He argued that it was only fair that they were issued titles.

*The issue of land and injustice and National cohesion and ethnic cohesion, who gets what jobs, what training and things like that. Let’s demystify these things, let’s give people title because land is a very special thing and our history of governance has always been that the governments of Kenya have always been cartels of land grabbers.*

Ken was not oblivious of the fears of those who had occupied houses in Kibra of the wrath of new Nubian landlords but he felt that the social and human right outweighed that fear, and that the market could adequately regulate any such practice. *The Nubian landlords will need tenants* he retorted.

This notion of social justice was evident in the kind of legislation that he supported in the National Assembly. The Prevention of Torture Bill and the National Coroner’s Service Bill are among those that he eloquently seconded. In both these bills, the interest of the marginalised and poor was top of his mind. He argued that the prevention of torture was an essential safe-guard for human rights that Kenya was a signatory to, but there had been too many instances of breach. He must have had in mind the numerous unexplained cases of individuals who died in police custody. He also brought attention to the Northern parts of the country, where the Kenyan security apparatus was accused of gross human rights abuses during pacification missions. The Coroners Bill was of specific interest to Ken because of the rights to access autopsies by the poor who meet death in unclear circumstances. His concern also extended to the Muslims, whose religious rights are impacted by the manner that mandatory autopsies are carried out.

Ken Okoth also controversially advocated for the legalization of the medicinal use of *Cannabis Sativa*, a cause for which he was totally misunderstood. The very mention of marijuana, blinded and deafened all moralists who read mischief in his draft legislation, an attempt at allowing bohemian excesses, or imitation of global movements for the de-criminalization of marijuana. A closer examination of Ken’s proposal reveals that not only was he addressing its therapeutic merits but its economic viability as well. Some later assumed that he was fighting for this legalization for personal
reasons as a cancer patient. Ken’s vision was to make medicinal marijuana whose benefits have been clinically proven, accessible as a cheaper alternative for health care. It would be great, if this legislation found a new champion.

In public forums, Ken Okoth was not shy to admit where his sponsoring party, ODM was guilty of draconian tendencies. It is speculated that his open-mindedness did not earn him many friends in the party hierarchy, and that there had been clandestine efforts to replace him as he sought a second term as MP. Despite all these challenges, even the parties’ detractors esteemed Ken Okoth as a model MP and his openness with his Cancer ailment had endeared him across the political divide. Ken repeatedly called for increased internal democracy within ODM. At the height of the infamous ODM elections where the ‘Men in Black’ disrupted the elections leading to the Ababu Namwamba defection, he counselled that ODM needed to be more accommodating, inclusive and tolerant and less of a closed club of entitled hand-picked minions. He also spoke to the need for the party stalwarts to create room for incorporation of the ideals of the younger generation of leaders. When he appeared in discussions on television forums, he was not reluctant to acknowledge the achievements of the ruling Jubilee Coalition, but was equally adept at pointing out and criticizing their failures.

Ken’s biggest sour point with the Jubilee Coalition was the administration’s molly-coddling of corruption and dearth of pro-poor policies. Ken was very optimistic about the potential of Kenya as a nation and its people. He articulated this hope several times bemoaning the fact that economic inclusivity was still a pipe dream. He said,

I really think Kenya is set to go. We have to keep our eyes on the ball. Where do we want to be in 2030? What type of country do we want to be, will we have realised the goals of clean water, access to fair and quality education for all our people, health care and things like that? How do we grow our economy so that everybody benefits?”

If Ken Okoth’s demise offers an opportunity to change the narrative about health care coverage in Kenya, his death will not have been in vain. Ken, has narrated the story of misdiagnosis running for a year and a half before the diagnosis of colorectal cancer was arrived at. By this time the disease had reached stage four and was basically incurable. The case of misdiagnosis also affected Safaricom CEO, Bob Collymore who died of Acute Myeloid Leukaemia a fortnight before Ken. In both cases, the delayed diagnosis – a factor of quality healthcare, is to blame. The current discourse around health, and more so prompted by the increasing visibility of cancer, is calling for the passage of legislation that will ensure every Kenyan has a medical cover.

Ken Okoth has been more pointed and asked that the state needs to remove taxes on cancer drugs as well as cancer diagnostic equipment such as computed tomography scans (CT Scans) and MRI machines so that the services are within reach of the poor. Ken’s concern has always been that cancer diagnosis and treatment cost is prohibitive to the poor. He noted that in his case he was lucky that he could access treatment abroad, but in typical Okoth fashion, he shone the torch back on the poor and questioned the fate facing poor Kenyans? Fundamentally, Ken was advocating for the revolutionary price rationalization of quality health care beginning with diagnosis and drugs.

When Okoth was in Paris undergoing treatment a follower on Twitter asked how he was doing and his reply was poignant, ‘Napambana na hali yangu kabisa’ (I am dealing with my situation).

Ken took ownership of his health and situation in a dignified manner. In his absence, he allowed Tim Wanyonyi the MP of Westlands Constituency to hold brief for him. When he returned to Kibera in what was a goodbye event he said how grateful he was for the partnership in the running of Kibra affairs such that even in his absence things continued to run smoothly.
Ken Okoth, was a visionary and inspirational leader. He had faith and hope in Kenya, and especially its youth. In a speech he made as closing remarks during a television discussion, he summarizes his dream and vision for Kenya, her future and her youth. Okoth’s words will undoubtedly continue to ring throughout this country.

I am proud to be a Kenyan, and I am proud of the accomplishments that we have achieved together as a nation, and even despite the challenges we have, I give great thanks to the leaders who fought for the independence of this country, who paid the sacrifices to give us multi-party democracy and our new constitution. And I pledge, and I know many leaders of my generation, I serve [with] in the national assembly, so many of us are there for the first time, we have accomplished something, based on the trust and faith in our people, in [a] peaceful manner to bring a new revolutionary class or leaders that countries like Egypt have not achieved, like Tunisia have not achieved, countries like Libya. So, let no Kenyan think that the way to solve this country's problems is to go through violence. Let us debate, let us compete on issues, let us trust our people to vote for the right leadership and let that leadership serve, not for their own personal greed, but for improving this nation. Real patriotism without corruption, without tribalism without nepotism; Kenya can take off. We have smartest people; we have the most committed people.

Ken Okoth will be a hard act to follow. Now, just as he has dealt with his situation – we who survive him must, pambana na hali yetu.


Rest in Peace.

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